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RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY 1149
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000765

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TAGS: PGOV KDEM KISL BA POL REFORM

SUBJECT: SHIA OPPOSITION SOCIETY AL WIFAQ TO PARTICIPATE IN ELECTIONS

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Leading Shia opposition society Al Wifaq May 1 voted in favor of participating in the parliamentary elections to be held later this year after boycotting the 2002 polls. Secretary General Shaikh Ali Salman told the press that the

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decision to participate was in line with the society's mission to improve the political atmosphere for citizens. Foreign Affairs Head Saeed Al Majed told EmbOff that Al Wifaq needed to establish a power base in the lower house Council of Representatives (COR) so it could negotiate more effectively with the government to promote its policy agenda.

A source close to Al Wifaq said that the group had decided to move at this time because of indications that the government might soon take steps that would be viewed as against the Shia, thus souring the political environment and making it more difficult for Al Wifaq to announce its participation. Noting opposition among many Shia youth, the source felt that a statement by spiritual leader Shaikh Issa Qassem, along the lines of Ayatollah Sistani's fatwa in Iraq, would be necessary to encourage broad participation by the Shia community. Another boycotting group, the small liberal secular Al Waad society, also announced its decision to participate. Al Wifaq's participation represents a paradigm shift in Bahrain's political system and will result in a messier, more confrontational, but ultimately more democratic environment. End Summary.

As Expected, Al Wifaq Votes to Participate

¶2. (U) In a move that was widely expected, leading Shia opposition society Al Wifaq officially decided to participate in the fall parliamentary elections after a four-year boycott of the political system. The society's internal consultative ("Shura") council the evening of May 1 approved by a vote of 20-5 (with five members absent) the recommendation of the General Secretariat to field candidates in the parliamentary elections. Al Wifaq had already stated publicly that it would compete in the municipal council elections, which will also likely be held in the fall.

¶13. (U) In a statement to the press, Secretary General Shaikh Ali Salman said, "For four years we have been working for a better political atmosphere for citizens, and our decision (to participate) reinforces our mission and programs." A statement issued by the society continued, "Taking part in the elections does not mean that the legislative body or constituencies are perfect. It comes from our belief that political participation would help us gain power to deliver the demands of the people to those in power." The statement said the group would participate because the boycott had resulted in the approval of many laws against the interests of Al Wifaq.

¶14. (U) Shura Council member and spokesman Ali Hamad Hassan told the press that the decision was in line with the views of Shaikh Issa Qassem, the group's spiritual leader. Hardline Shia leader Hassan Mushaima, head of the breakaway Haq Movement and until last October Vice President of Al Wifaq, said publicly that the decision did not come as a surprise. The Haq Movement is not in confrontation with Al Wifaq, he said, but it was up to the people to decide whether participation or boycotting was the best way for them to achieve their goals and ambitions.

Participation to Create Power Base in Parliament

¶15. (C) Al Wifaq Head of Foreign Affairs Saeed Al Majed told Pol/Econ Chief that the Secretariat had been confident it had the votes in the Shura Council, and it was pleased with the outcome. He said the response thus far to the decision was uniformly positive. He had received calls from Al Wifaq members, government ministers, and parliamentarians congratulating them on the decision. Al Majed said Al

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Wifaq's goal in participating in the elections is to have strong representation in the elected Council of Representatives. He had told P/E Chief previously that Al Wifaq was not interested in "getting the chair" of the King or Prime Minister. Rather, the group wants to negotiate with the government from a position of strength, based upon its representation in the COR, to promote its policy agenda, obtain a few ministerial positions, and place members in the appointed upper house of parliament, the Shura Council. He said the group's legislative agenda would focus on amending the constitution, combating unemployment, making housing more widely available, and fighting official corruption.

¶16. (C) According to a source close to Al Wifaq, the group decided to move at this time because of indications the government might take actions viewed as against the Shia community, such as arresting Haq Movement leaders or trying to pass a budget during the current session rather than the post-election session. While these moves may not directly impact Al Wifaq, they would sour the political environment and make it more difficult for Al Wifaq to announce its participation. The source noted that even without these complicating factors, reactions to the decision in the Internet chatroom "Bahrain On-Line," frequented mostly by youth, were strongly negative. He thought that Shaikh Qassem would have to issue a statement or a fatwa, along the lines of Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq, in favor of participation in order to bring along the dissenters in the community.

Al Waad to Contest Elections Also

¶17. (C) Ibrahim Sharif, president of the liberal secular opposition society Al Waad, also announced recently that his group would participate in the elections after boycotting the 2002 polls. While a very small group, Al Waad's decision to participate is important symbolically because of its historical role in Bahraini politics, in particular in the

parliament of the early 1970s.

Comment

¶8. (C) Al Wifaq's decision to participate represents a major paradigm shift in Bahrain's political system, with the potential to impact almost every aspect of Bahrain's legislative and executive governance. Estimates vary widely on Al Wifaq's expected representation in the COR, ranging from 12 to 20 seats in the 40-member body. Those most directly affected will be the COR's current Shia MPs, who stood for election in defiance of Al Wifaq's boycott in 2002.

Al Wifaq will certainly target these seats and, unless the present MPs strike an alliance with the group, Al Wifaq is expected to win most if not all of these races. The most active political blocs in the COR have been the Sunni Islamist groups, Al Minbar (Muslim Brotherhood) and Al Asala (Salafi). Despite it also being an Islamist party, Al Wifaq has said that it will not ally itself with the Sunnis, saying it does not share the Sunnis' legislative agenda focusing on public behavior in accordance with Islamic teachings. The government will find the COR to be more combative than it is currently, and will face a group with an activist agenda to amend the constitution and promote the bread-and-butter interests of the Shia community. Al Wifaq's participation in Bahraini politics will undoubtedly result in a messier, more confrontational, but ultimately more democratic political environment.

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